

SEVEN KEYS TO BALDPATE

BY EARL DERR BIGGERS

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CHAPTER XV.

Wee in Number Seven.

He had "got to him" after all. Who? He thought of the smooth, crafty mountain of a man who had detained him a moment ago. Who but Cargan and Max, of course? They had found his childish hiding place, and the money had come home to their eager hands. No doubt they were laughing slyly at him now.

Well, he would show them yet. He got up and walked the floor. Once he had held them up in the snow and spoiled their little game. He would do it again. How? When? He did not know. His soul cried for action of some sort, but he was up against a blind alley, and he knew it.

He unlocked the door of No. 7. To go downstairs, to meet the sweet eagerness of the girl who depended on him, to confess himself tricked—it took all the courage he had. Why had it all happened anyhow? Confound it! Had he not come up here to be alone with his thoughts? But, brighter side, it had given him her, or it would give him her before the last card was played. He shut his teeth tightly and went down the stairs.

Mr. Bland had added himself to the group about the fire. Quickly the eyes of Miss Norton met Magee's. She was trembling with excitement. Cargan, huge, red, cherry, got in Magee's path once more.

"I'll annihilate this man," thought Magee.

"I've been figuring," said the mayor, "that was one thing he didn't have to contend with. No, sir, there wasn't any bright young man hunting up old Napoleon and knocking him in the monthly magazines. They didn't go down to Sandrine and pump it out of the neighbors that he started business on borrowed money and that his father drank more than was good for him. They didn't run illustrated articles about the diamonds he wore and moving pictures of him eating soup."

"No, I guess not," replied Magee abstractedly.

"I reckon there was a lot in his record wasn't meant for the newspapers," continued Cargan reflectively. "And it didn't get there. Nap was lucky. He had it on the reformers there. They couldn't squash him with the power of the press."

Mr. Magee broke away from the mayor's rambling history and hurried to Miss Norton.

"You promised yesterday," he reminded her, "to show me the pictures of the admiral."

"So I did," she replied, rising quickly. "To think you have spent all this time in Baldpate inn and not paid homage to its own particular cock of the walk."

She led him to a portrait hanging beside the desk.

"Behold," she said, "the admiral on a sunny day in July. Note the starchy grandeur of him, even with the thermometer up in the clouds. That's one of the things the rocking chair does adores in him. Can you imagine the flurry at the approach of all that superiority? Theodore Roosevelt, William Faversham and Richard Harding Davis all arriving together couldn't overshadow the admiral for a minute."

Mr. Magee gazed at the picture of a pompous little man whose nervous mistake seemed anxious to make up for the lack of hair on his head.

"A bald hero at a summer resort," he commented, "it seems incredible."

"Oh, they think he lost his hair fighting for the flag," she laughed.

"Is it possible to see the room where the admiral plays his famous game?"

"Step softly," she answered. "In here. There stands the very table."

"I love you!" he cried desperately.

They went into the small card room at the right of the entrance to the office, and Mr. Magee quickly closed the door behind them. The time had come. He felt his heart sink.

"Well?" said the girl, with an eagerness she could not conceal.

Mr. Magee groped for words and found—his old friends of the mountain.

"I love you," he cried desperately.

"You must believe I want to help you. It looks rather the other way now, I'll admit. I want you to have that money. I don't know who you are not what this all means, but I want you to have it. I went upstairs determined to give it to you."

"Really?" The word was at least 50 degrees below the temperature of the cardroom.

"Yes, really. I won't ask you to believe, but I'm telling the truth. I went

to the place where I had fatuously hid the money—under a brick of my fireplace. It was gone."

"How terribly unfortunate."

"Yes, isn't it?" Mr. Magee rejoiced that she took so calm a view of it.

"They searched the room, of course, and they found the money. They're on top now, but I'm going."

He stopped, for he had seen her face. She—taking a calm view of it? No, indeed. Billy Magee saw that she was furiously, wildly angry. He remembered always having written it down that beautiful women were even more beautiful in anger. How, he wondered, had he fallen into that error?

"Please do not bore me," she said through her teeth, "with any further recital of what you 'are going' to do. You seem to have a fatal facility in that line. Your record of accomplishment is pathetically weak. And oh, what a fool I've been!"

Even after last night, he believed. "I know," he said helplessly, "you're terribly disappointed, and I don't blame you. But you will find out that you've done me an injustice. I'm going."

"One thing," said she, smiling a smile that could have cut glass, "you are going to do. I know that you won't fall this time, because I shall personally see you through with it. You're going to stop making a fool of me."

"Tell me," pleaded Billy Magee, "tell me who you are—what this is all about. Can't you see I'm working in the dark? You must!"

She threw open the card room door.

"An English officer," she remarked loudly, stepping out into the other room, "taught the admiral the game—at least, so he said. It added so much romance to it in the eyes of the rocking chair feet. Can't you see—India—the hot sun—the Kipling local color—a silent, tanned, handsome man eternally playing solitaire on the porch of the barracks? Has the barracks a porch?"

Roused, humiliated, baffled, Mr. Magee felt his cheeks burn.

"We shall see what we shall see," he muttered.

"Why coin the inevitable into a bromide?" she asked.

Mr. Magee joined the group by the fire. Never before in his life had he been so determined on anything as he was now that the package of money should return to his keeping. But how? How trace through this maze of humans the present holder of that precious bundle of collaterals? He looked at Mr. Max, sneering at his leonine colored sneer at the mayor's side; at the mayor himself, nonchalant as the admiral being photographed; at the author of the Arabella fiction, sprawling at ease before the fire; at the tawdry Mrs. Norton and at Mrs. Thornhill, who had by her pleading the night before made him ridiculous. Who of these had the money now? Who but Cargan and Max, their faces serene, their eyes eagerly on the preparations for lunch, their plans for leaving Baldpate inn no doubt already made?

"I've just been thinking," he said lightly, "what an absolutely ridiculous figure I must be in your eyes, buzzing round and round like a bee in a bottle and getting nowhere at all. Listen—one has left the inn. While they stay there's hope. Am I not to have one

more chance—a chance to prove to you how much I care?"

She turned, and even in the dusk he saw that her eyes were wet.

"Oh, I don't know, I don't know," she whispered. "I'm not angry any more. I'm just at sea. I don't know what to think—what to do. Why try any longer? I think I'll go away—and give up."

"You mustn't do that," urged Magee. They came back into the freight.

"Miss Thornhill has just informed me that she knows who has the package!"

"Indeed," said the girl calmly, but her face had flushed.

"I didn't let her tell me, of course."

"Why not?" Oh, how maddening women could be!

"Because I couldn't use her information in getting the money for you."

"You are still 'going to' get the money for me?"

The freight fell on her lips, her hair, her eyes, and Mr. Magee knew that his selfish bachelorhood was at an end. He stooped to her.

"Give me, please," he said, "the benefit of the doubt." It was a poor speech compared to what was in his heart, but Billy Magee was rapidly learning that most of the pretty speeches went with puppets who could not feel.

CHAPTER XVI.

The Exquisite Mr. Hayden.

Bland and Max came in from a brisk walk on the veranda. The mayor of Reuton, who had been dozing near the desk, started.

Miss Norton rose and ascended the stairs. Still the protesting Magee was at her heels. At the head of the stairs she turned.

"You shall have your final chance," she said. "The mayor, Max and Bland are alone in the office. I don't approve of eavesdropping at Baldpate in the summer. It has spoiled a lot of perfectly adorable engagements. But in winter it's different. Whether you really want to help me or not, I'm sure I don't know, but if you do the conversation below now might prove of interest."

"I'm sure it will," Magee agreed.

"Well, I have a scheme. Listen. Baldpate inn is located in a temperance county. That doesn't mean that people don't drink here. It simply means that there's a lot of mystery and romance connected with the drinking. Sometimes those who follow the god of chance in the card room late at night grow thirsty. Now, it happens that there is a trapdoor in the floor of the card room, up which drinks are frequently passed from the cellar. Isn't that exciting? A hotel clerk who became human once in my presence told me all about it. If you went into the cellar and hunted about you might find that door and climb up into the card room."

"A bully idea," agreed Mr. Magee. "I'll hurry down there this minute. I'm more grateful than you can guess for this chance. And this time—but you'll see."

Magee hurried to the cellar and with the aid of a box of matches found a ladder leading to a door cut in the floor above. He climbed through dust and cobwebs, unfastened the catch and pushed cautiously upward. In another minute he was standing in the chilly little card room. Softly he opened the card room door about half an inch and put his ear to it.

The three men were grouped very close at hand, and he heard Mr. Bland speaking in low tones:

"I'm talking to you boys as a friend. The show is over. There ain't no use hanging around for the concert—there won't be none. Go home and get some clean collars and a square meal."

"If you think I'm going to be shook off by any fairy story like that," said the mayor of Reuton, "you're a child with all a child's touching faith."

"All right," replied Mr. Bland. "I thought I'd pass you the tip, that's all. It ain't nothing to me what you do. But it's all over, and you've lost out. I'm sorry you have, but I take Hayden's orders."

"Dash Hayden!" snarled the mayor. "It was his idea to make a three act play out of this thing. He's responsible for this silly trip to Baldpate. This audience we've been acting for—he let us in for them."

"I know," said Bland. "But you can't deny that Baldpate inn looked like the ideal spot at first—second, off the beaten path, you know, and all that."

"Yes," sneered the mayor, "as secluded as a Sunday school the Sunday before Christmas."

"Well, who could have guessed it?" went on Mr. Bland. "As I say, I don't care what you do. I just passed you the tip. I've got that nice little package of the long green. I've got it where you'll never find it."

"How did you get hold of it?" inquired Mr. Lou Max.

"I had my eye on this little professor person," explained Mr. Bland. "This morning when Magee went up the mountain I trailed the highbrow to Magee's room. When I busted in, unannounced by the butter, he was making his getaway. I don't like to talk about what followed. He's an old man, and I sure didn't mean to break his glasses nor scratch his dome of thought. There's ideas in that dome go back to the time of Anthony J. Chandler. But he's always talking about that literature chair of his—why couldn't he stay at home and sit in it? Anyhow, I got the bundle all right, all right. I wonder what the little fossil wants with it."

"The Doc's glasses was broke," said Max, evidently to the mayor of Reuton.

"Um-m," came Cargan's voice. "Bland, how much do you make working for this nice, kind gentleman, Mr. Hayden?"

"Oh, about \$2,000 a year, with pickings," replied Bland.

"Yes?" went on Mr. Cargan. "I ain't no Charles Dana Gibson with words. My talk's a little rough and sketchy, I guess. But here's the outline, plain as I can make it. Twenty thousand a year from Hayden. Twenty thousand in two seconds if you hand that package to me."

"No," objected Bland. "I've been

honest—after a fashion. I can't quite stand for that. I'm working for Hayden."

"Don't be a fool," sneered Max. "Of course," said the mayor. "I appreciate your scruples, having had a few in my day myself, though you'd never think so to read the Star. But look at it sensible. The money belongs to me. If you was to hand it over you'd be just doing plain justice. What right has Hayden on his side? I did what was agreed. Do I get my pay?"

"No," said Bland, but his tone was less firm. "I can't go back on Hayden. No—it wouldn't."

"Twenty thousand," repeated Cargan. "Ten years' salary the way you are going ahead at present. What's Hayden ever done for you? He'll throw you down some day, the way he's thrown me."

"I—I—don't know," wavered Bland. "You get the package," suggested the mayor; "take \$20,000 out and slip the rest to me. No questions asked."

"Well," began Bland. He was lost. Suddenly the quiet of Baldpate inn was assailed by a loud pounding at the inn door and a voice crying, "Bland—let me in!"

"There's Hayden now!" cried Mr. Bland.

"It ain't too late," came the mayor's voice. "You can do it yet. It ain't too late."

"Do what?" cried Bland in a firm tone. "You can't bribe me, Cargan. He raised his voice. 'Go round to the east door, Mr. Hayden.' Then he added to Cargan: 'That's my answer. I'm going to let him in.'"

"Let him in," bellowed the mayor. "Let the bound in. I guess I've got something to say to Mr. Hayden."

There came to Magee's ears the sound of opening doors and of returning footsteps.

"How do you do, Cargan?" said a voice new to Baldpate.

"Cut the society howdies," replied the mayor hotly. "There's a little score to be settled between me and you, Hayden. I ain't quite wise to your orchid in the buttonhole ways. I don't understand your system. When I give my word I keep it. Has that gone out of style up on the avenue where you live?"

"There are conditions," began Hayden.

"The b—there are!" roared Cargan. "A man's word's his word, and he keeps it to me or I know the reason why. You can't come down to the city hall with any new deal like this. I was to have two hundred thousand. Why didn't I get it?"

"Because," replied Hayden smoothly, "the—er—little favor you were to grant me in return is to be made useless by the courts."

"Can I help that?" the mayor demanded. "Was there anything about

stranger. Hayden, confronting the mayor, Mr. Cargan's title of exquisite best described him. The newcomer was tall, fair, fastidious in dress and manner. A revolver gleamed in his hand.

"Joe," he said firmly, "take me to that money at once."

"It's out here," replied Bland. He and Hayden disappeared through the dining room door into the darkness. Cargan and Max followed close behind.

Hot with excitement, Mr. Magee slipped from his place of concealment. A little fit for the gods was in the air. He must be in the midst of it. Perhaps again in a three cornered fight it would be the third party that would emerge victorious.

In the darkness of the dining room he bumped into a limp, clinging figure. It proved to be the hermit of Baldpate mountain.

"I got to talk to you, Mr. Magee," he whispered in a frightened tremor. "I got to have a word with you this minute."

"Not now!" cried Magee, pushing him aside. "Later."

The hermit wildly seized his arm. "No, now," he said. "There's strange goings on here, Mr. Magee. I got something to tell you—about a package of money I found in the kitchen."

Mr. Magee stood very still. Beside him in the darkness he heard the hermit's excited breathing.

Undecided, Mr. Magee looked toward the kitchen door, from behind which came the sound of men's voices. The hermit of Baldpate fairly trembled with news.

"Since I broke in on you yesterday morning," he said in a low tone, "one thing has followed another so fast that I'm a little dazed."

"You have nothing on me there, Peters," Magee answered.

"Well," went on the hermit, "as I say, through all this downpour of people, including women, I've hung on to one idea. I'm working for you. That's why I feel I ought to give what information I got to you."

Mr. Magee agreed impatiently.

"Where you find women," Peters continued, "there you find things beyond understanding. History!"

"Get to the point."

"Well, yes. This afternoon I was hunting around in the big refrigerator with a candle, thinking maybe some little token of food had been left over from last summer's rush—something in a can that time cannot without custom stale, as the poet says—and away up on the top shelf, in the darkest corner, I found a little package."

"There was money in that package—lots of it, enough to found a university or buy a woman's gowns for a year. I was examining it careful-like when a shadow came in the doorway."

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Hayden's voice was cool and even as he spoke to Bland.

"Got the money, Joe?"

"Yes," Bland answered.

"Well, we'd better wait, hadn't we?" Bland's voice was shaky.

"No. We'll take it and get out," answered Hayden.

"I want to see you do it!" cried Cargan. "If you think I've come up here on a pleasure trip I got a chart and a pointer all ready for your next lesson. And let me put you wise."

This nobly little idea of yours about Baldpate inn is the worst ever. The place is as full of people as if the regular summer rates was being charged."

"The devil it is!" cried Hayden. His voice betrayed a startled annoyance.

"It hasn't worried me none," went on the mayor. "They can't touch me. I own the prosecutor, and you know it. But it ain't going to do you any good on the avenue if you're seen here with me, is it, Mr. Hayden?"

"The more reason," replied Hayden, "for getting the money and leaving at once. I'm not afraid of you, Cargan. I'm armed."

"I ain't," sneered the mayor. "But no exquisite from your set with his little air gun ever scared me. You try to get away from here with that bundle and you'll find yourself all tangled up in the worst scrap that ever happened."

"Where's the money, Joe?" asked Hayden.

"You won't wait"—Bland begged.

"Wait to get my own money—I guess not! Show me where it is."

"Remember," put in Cargan, "that money's mine. And don't have any pipe dreams about the law—the law ain't called into things of this sort, as a rule. I guess you'd be the last to call it. You'll never get away from here with my money."

Mr. Magee opened the card room door farther and saw the figure of the

stranger. Hayden, confronting the mayor, Mr. Cargan's title of exquisite best described him. The newcomer was tall, fair, fastidious in dress and manner. A revolver gleamed in his hand.

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